



Historic Fruita



Fruita’s historic period (1883–1941) illustrates the opening and closing of the frontier in southern Utah.

One-Room Fruita School	<p>Education was a high priority for large families settling this remote frontier community.</p> <p>Nettie Behunin was 14 when she began teaching school in her parent’s backyard. She taught outside for several years from the end of fall harvest to the beginning of spring planting, until 1896, when Fruita residents completed work on the one-room school.</p>	<p>First through eighth grade attended all at once, and class sizes varied from eight to 26 students. The building was used for church services, town meetings, box socials and dances when school was out of session. The Fruita School closed in 1941 due to the dwindling population of Fruita.</p>
Mail Tree	<p>Mail delivery was considered unreliable in 1914 Fruita, arriving by wagon from Torrey (11 miles to the west) en route to Hanksville (37 miles to the east).</p> <p>Mailbags and wooden boxes were hung on a large tree in the center of the community. Outgoing mail was picked up by the postman who replaced it with new mail about every three weeks.</p>	<p>A prominent Fremont cottonwood known as the <i>mail tree</i> still stands in the picnic area along the Scenic Drive, reminding us of Fruita’s limited connection with the outside world over a hundred years ago.</p>
Pioneer Register	<p>The need for an efficient transportation route increased with the settlement of Fruita and several pioneer towns to the east. Capitol Gorge was indirect and subject to flash floods, but it was less difficult than fording the Fremont River numerous times.</p> <p>Elijah Cutler Behunin and a small crew of men set out in 1883 to clear over three miles of Capitol Gorge for a new wagon road. It took eight days to clear the boulders and small shrubs. This became the main travel corridor through the Waterpocket Fold until 1962, when State Highway 24 was built.</p>	<p>Early travelers started carving their names into the soft sandstone walls of the canyon in 1871, long before the road was built. The tradition continued as more people passed through Capitol Gorge. This became known as the Pioneer Register.</p> <p>To protect the historic integrity of the Pioneer Register, further additions are now illegal.</p>

The Farmstead

The self-sufficient community of Fruita was made up of a few large, hard-working and interdependent families.

Calvin Pendelton, Fruita’s only polygamist, built a stucco house in 1908. Pendelton constructed a barn, smokehouse and rock walls on the mesa slopes above the house.

The rock walls may have been constructed by the Pendelton children when they became

mischevious or bored. It also kept the family’s sheep off the hilltop.

Jorgen Jorgenson owned the home after the Pendeltons and worked the pasture until he sold it to his son-in-law Dewey Gifford. Gifford and his family occupied the home for 41 years, beginning in 1928, and were the last residents to leave Fruita in 1969.



Stucco house and rock wall in background, barn in foreground.

The Orchards

Nels Johnson planted the first orchards soon after he constructed a small cabin above the Fremont River. The soil and climate allowed a wide range of crops—especially fruit—to be grown.

The residents of Fruita planted apple, apricot, peach, pear, plum and nut trees. Grape arbors were prevalent within a decade and later became part of a thriving, but illegal, local alcohol industry.

Today the orchards hold approximately 2700 trees, primarily apple, apricot, peach, pear and cherry, with a few plum, mulberry, almond, pecan and walnut trees.

Fruita is listed on the National Register of Historical Places as a Historical Cultural Landscape. The orchards and surrounding three square miles are preserved and protected. The National Park Service maintains the orchards with a small crew that is kept busy year round with pruning, irrigation and orchard management.



Mulford Orchard

Additional information is available on our website www.nps.gov/care which also links to the Capitol Reef Natural History Association, a non-profit cooperating association that sells publications on Capitol Reef’s cultural and natural history.